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Interview 1: Michelle Camaya Julian and Nico Del Mundo
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Moderator: Eleanor Lipat-Chesler (Independent Scholar, Ube Arte)
Additional Participants: Mary Talusan Lacancale (co-curator), Michelle Camaya Julian (dancer, Samahan Filipino American Performing Arts and Education Center), Nico Del Mundo (cultural dancer, musician).

Interview Transcription

Eleanor 00:00:00
Hi everyone. Welcome to the first interview of our California Revealed UCLA ethnomusicology archive and Ube Arte partnership for our book project. My name is Eleanor Lipat-Chesler, I'm an independent scholar with Ube Arte, and I would like everyone to introduce themselves.

Mary 00:00:27
Hi, everyone. I'm Mary Talusan Lacancale and I'm a co-curator of this project for California revealed, and I'm just so glad that we could get together and do this project.

Michelle 00:00:42
Hello, everyone. My name is Michelle Camaya Julian, and I'm a dancer. I've been dancing since I was four years old and I joined the Samahan Filipino American performing arts and education center when I was eight years old, many moons ago.

Nico 00:00:58
Hi everyone, my name is Nico Del Mundo. I'm also a cultural dancer, cultural musician as of recently, based in San Diego. I've been a part of many PCNs and a couple of different Philippine dance companies as well.

Eleanor 00:01:16
So, let's start from the beginning. How did you get into Philippine cultural dance?

Michelle 00:01:22
Well, like I said when I was eight years old, I joined Samahan. I was basically recruited by, I feel like she is the muse of Samahan, a very active woman, her name is Ellie Aguilar, and she recruited me when I was eight years old. She saw me dancing at Media Tap Dance show or a jazz performance and she approached my mom, and she told her about Samahan. So, since then, I joined Samahan. Since then I became a junior dancer, I evolved into a company dancer, and I also was a professional dancer in college in professional dance performances. I was also

recruited to become choreographer for a lot of Samahan performances. I then evolved into being a dance teacher and company member, and recently, I was also the vice president of the board, so many different hats in Samahan throughout all the years. Now, I'm co-teacher with Nico in the north county of San Diego for the last three years now, almost four years.

Nico 00:02:40
I think it's about four years now

Eleanor 00:0:42
If you were eight years old, would you say the interest came from inside you or were you pushed into it?

Michelle 00:02:49
I don't know if I'd say pushed. I was just down for anything. I was just like a wild little girl, so starting with dance at four years old, you know, being approached to join Philippine folk dance at eight, I just did anything my mom told me to do. And so, I joined folk dance company, and little did I know that Philippine cultural dance was being instilled in me through this like, you know, through the art of dance. Philippine culture through the art of dance from Ruby Chong. So, I just stuck with it, right? I enjoyed it, we formed a sense of community, I bonded with a lot of friends, and it's been a part of my life ever since.

Mary 00:03:33
Do you remember a moment when you were that young, and, it maybe dawned on you that this cultural dance that you were doing had more significance than just dancing by itself? So, in other words, how did it inform your sense of identity when you were that young?

Michelle 00:03:57
Well, it didn't really hit me, everything that I'd learned with Samahan, until I actually went to college. I was at a dance major at UC Irvine. And it really hit me when I was, what I've learned with someone, when my dance history professor at UC Irvine was showing cultural dances from all over the world, pictures, and he showed a picture of Philippine folk dance company, maybe it was Bayanihan, and showed the picture, what I knew was Singkil. She was mentioning, she said the word, Tinikling, she said "yeah this is a cultural dance from the Philippines, The tinikling, they use the bamboo poles. I had to raise my hand and let her know, actually, that is a dance influenced from the southern Philippines (we don't all know about the history of Singkil), but I said Tinikling is more of a rural dance from the countryside, and this photo is actually in another region of the Philippines. So it was incredible that *that* knowledge that I had learned from growing up was applying to my university years, where I had to actually correct the professor of dance history. And she took it in stride, she thanked, and it wasn't until later, thank you for asking the question married, where we got to travel to the Philippines and do research out there. Going with a bunch of Filams with KULARTS with Alleluia [Panis], from San Francisco. So there, when we were able to travel to the Philippines, I mean I'm going everywhere right now, that really dawned on me like the resources in the Philippines and bringing it back to the US.

Eleanor 00:05:42
Michelle, I'm gonna ask you to hold that thought because we're going to dig into the topic of research in a minute. But I would like to invite Nico to tell us his story.

Nico 00:05:55
So, how I got into cultural performing is kind of a roller coaster. I was kind of this firecracker of a kid and I just couldn't stick to like one thing, mainly because I want to learn so many things, but I guess where it really started was with PCNs with the Philippine cultural nights, but that was actually at my high school. Prior to that, I was inducted in the international thespian society. If you don't know, it's basically just acting guilds for many high schoolers and students, so I was like a theater person in middle school and high school. I also lived overseas, so by the time I moved to San Diego in 2011, I didn't have friends, I didn't know anyone, it was basically the Filipino club who came up to me saying: hey, you should join the club. And then, I find out about this show that they're doing. "we are having auditions for this show," and that's right up my alley and I'm like, okay I'm gonna do this. And it was the PCN, and I auditioned, I got the lead role, I saw all of the cultural dances from there. And I did a couple of them. I didn't think too much of it at the time, but I did, I kept going with PCNs. I think, over the course of like, high school, college, I think, I've been a part of maybe around 10, if not more PCNs, just when you add them altogether. After I graduated from high school, that's where I had seen Pasacat, the Philippine dance company in San Diego, and I was just interested because they were in like Filam fests, and all the Philippine American festivals that happen in San Diego. I saw them perform in a couple places, and you know, I'm interested, so I took me and a couple my friends to one of the rehearsals. I was the only one who ended up staying in Pasacat, and then later, I ended up joining Samahan, like maybe a few years down the line. I've been with Samahan ever since, and also, with all of that, I've also been part of Malaya, PKE, what not. But that's really how I got started. Interesting how the world of theater, overseas, not even in America, how that was the link that really brought me into PCNs, and then, here I am today.

Eleanor 00:07:57
Nikko you said, 10 or 11 PCNs, clearly you didn't go to 10, or 11 schools, how does that work?

Nico 00:08:05
Yes. That wasn't a mistake, you heard that correct. I've been a part of, I mean, obviously I went to a high school, I went to a college. I probably was part of two PCNs in high school. And, when I was in college, I went to a community college first. I was a part of one there. And I also, a lot of, the Filams space, at least in San Diego, I don't know how it is in other parts of southern California, or Northern California, how exclusive they are, but they were pretty open down here. So, I was a part of maybe like three or four with SDSU. I did maybe about three with UCSD, later on in life. I did one at USD. So that's just kind of combining all of them, mostly, my early years, like, definitely in high school and early college, it was me being like, the director/writer, or choreographer, later on, with all the other schools, like states, like SDSU and UCSD, USD, It was either, I was just performing, or I was teaching a couple pieces to the students themselves.

So that's kind of what I've been doing more recently, since I'm older now. I'm considered an "alumni." So that's how I got involved in all these PCNs, and I'm still ongoingly [sic] involved with them.

Eleanor 00:09:26
in the beginning, were you more recruited by the other schools, or how does that work?

Nico 00:09:32
I think that's where I was just more so, I wanted to do it. I was so interested in this stuff, like the whole theater, art's about. I don't know what it was at the time, something about, I can't even really tell you. But there was just a part of me that I really wanted to be a part of these things. I would specifically, like when I was going college hunting in high school, I basically looked at these schools based off the quality of their PCN. I know, that shouldn't be a factor for higher studies, but that was really like a big thing for me. Like I wanted to see, okay, how did their PCNs look, and that was actually one of the things, as a high schooler on what I was interested in. And I know that's not the thing for everyone. It sounds very Disney magic, it sounds very written, but that's kind of the person I was. I was that weird person that really got excited over this kind of stuff and, you know, so that's really how it was. So, I was more actively involved in reaching out to certain groups of people. Like, Oh, I have this friend, like in my circle of friends, like, "oh, you went to states?" I would always peek my nose everywhere and offer some things, and then you know one thing led to another. A lot of the schools down here were pretty open about it, so, I'm grateful for that, I had many experiences. I love it, I kind of hate it to a degree as well, but I mostly love it. So, that was me. I know that's not how it is for other people kinda just really yanking their friends. I was the one like, "yo friends let's go do this thing. And then that's how, that's me.

Eleanor 00:11:05
what you seem to be describing a kind of a passionate love for theater, for performance, for the stage, for kind of artistic collaboration. I'm going to ask you this, and I'd also like to hear from Michelle about, was there any part of your cultural identity, or self-identity involved in this, at the beginning?

Nico 00:11:25
I'm not sure. I think it's because I was involved with music and theater growing up.
[I've been to many] the schools that I went to overseas [were very], they had a lot of money for certain extracurricular activities. So, drama was one of them, they called the Dramatic Arts, and not just that, obviously sports and band, and music, and all that, so I remember taking these [work like] weeklong workshop conferences in other countries on just the theatrics and/of dramatic arts. And I've learned everything from like Shakespearean text to the reader's theater, and so many different forms of theater. And I guess a part of it was when I was introduced to the world of PCN, I was like: "oh, y'all need help, so, let me tell you." I have a lot of experience, as [a, you know] someone who never did it professionally, but I have really studied with it. I've done a lot of different genres of theater that wasn't necessarily like Broadway, or community

theater base, was more like the obscure kind of theater that you'd never hear about. So, I was really into storytelling and what not. So, that's kind of what it was for me, I have something to provide so why don't I help. That was how I went about it mostly.

Michelle 00:12:49
Can I just add that Nico, when he was mentioning about PCN, and going back to Mary's question earlier, it sparked a memory because UC Irvine has a really incredible Filipino club called Kababayan. So, when I went to UC Irvine—as a dance major and also coming from Samahan Philippine folk and history, and just being a social person in general and wanting to connect and create community in another city, other than San Diego, in a new community—I joined Kababayan, and *in* Kababayan, I didn't even know about PCNs. But then, okay there's this show at the end of the school year, where you have the different suites, and if you want to choreograph for it, let us know. And coming from a folk-dance history, from knowing it, I wanted to contribute my knowledge of what I knew was my folk dance, and teach it to my classmates, and teach it to the other people in the club. So, the first couple years, yes, I was a part of the PCN coordinators, so, going to contributing my knowledge of folk dance to other university students — because when you think about it, not a lot of people do learn Philippine folk dance, there's only a handful of people who have gained the knowledge to be able to teach it, so—that was a really big honor to be a part of that.

Mary 00:14:29
If I could just interject one thing about my experience growing up. It's just so amazing that as Filipino Americans growing up in San Diego, you had so many choices and so many resources. So, I mean, I came from a small town in Massachusetts and we did one group that was like for all of New England, but I wasn't as convenient. There definitely weren't any other choices, so, I just am amazed by *that*. But, my real question is, both of you touched on this and I think what you have in common is that you do come from artistic backgrounds already, and your involvement, it seems to me from what you said, was more on the artistic side, and that when you got to college or participated in PCN, you made contributions to not only that genre, but to the students that were there. What do you think, or, what were some of the [maybe] issues, or struggles, or gaps in knowledge perhaps that you think PCN participants benefited from your artistic contributions?

Nico 00:15:47
Okay, so I'm not gonna lie. My early years in PCN, I made some wacky creations, I made some weird stuff. Looking back at that I would never ever, bow-wow, I would never do that, ever again. But, yeah, I would make weird things, not just modern, but not modern [. . .] things because that was overdone. I would make modern Sakuting [this weird like], storytelling things because I came from a very story telling background, very theater-like. I know Michelle was also involved with theater, but I was kind of involved with obscure theater. I don't really know how to explain it. If you know what reader's theater is, that's one really good example that I have a really strong focus in, that I feel no one's ever experienced that part of. I feel what I contributed is just this weirdness, I feel like a lot of PCNs have kind of [and I know that sounds strange but a lot of PCNs] tend to follow a formula. And I'm kind of a rebel at heart, I like to challenge things I'm

like: "why does it have to be like this." I do kind of realize how that can be problematic in some ways, and I've learned a lot since then. I'm still kind of the same person, where I do like challenging systematic structures. That's just one of the things, I like getting people out of the minds, like it has to be like this. And just the way I told stories with the dances. I remember one of the years with SDSU, I choreographed, and I was also advising their dances in general. All of the dances that they should do is like, "you shouldn't do this dance, unless it does anything with your story or characters." So, I think Michelle you might have seen this show, where I was choreographing this dance, it was a colonial dance. But, basically, if this dance did not happen, [it would cut, it wouldn't] there would be a plot hole in the actual story of the PCN. So, it was kind of choreographed in a way where it was like a funeral, but it was like really subverted [sic] in terms of story and plot. So, it was really important to that particular show, it wasn't just because it was added into that certain thing. So, I just tried to do different things like that, especially in my early years being involved with PCN. So, that's just what I would contribute just being a little bit different, trying to get us to think about how things are traditionally structured. That's mainly my contributions.

Michelle 00:18:16
In regard to teaching the dances during the PCNs, what I recall was a lot of the college students were basically blank canvases, right? Like you said, not a lot of them have the direct resources to learn like legit Philippine folk dance, and coming from my history with Samahan, I entrusted myself, as a student, as a dancer, to my teachers, and what I learned from them. And so, going into it creatively, yes, I would tweak it to make it pop for myself, with the freedom as a choreographer on to them. Like with Maglalatik, and, like Nico mentioned earlier with Tinikling, and just being creative and juicing it up in my own way. And, it wasn't until later on, where I became a little bit more skeptical, because I became a little bit more knowledgeable. Because what I grew up with, in Samahan, the executive director, the woman who created and formed Samahan, the late Dr. Lolita Carter, she also came from a modern dance background, so she revered modern dance intertwined into the folk dance. And, I feel like in the 80s and the 90s that was okay, but now going into this new generation of minds, where they're asking legitimate questions. So, where's this dance derived from, what's the purpose of this dance? So, now I feel like in regard to the dance and presenting dances, we're actually going back to more traditional work. So, yeah, I created some weird stuff, when I was given the opportunity. Because, yeah, that's all I knew, and I didn't delve deeper into research and resources, and the legitimacy of the dances. I just taught what I knew, and then flourished it up a little bit more. And now, things are changed. It's like no, now I'm wanting to have actual direct resources from the Philippines and all that traditional work and be respectful of all the many cultures of the Philippines. If I was to do work now. When I'm to do work now.

Nico 00:20:38
I wanted to add something. I know that I kind of said I was a rebel and that was kind of my contribution, I like challenging the system. To be a little bit more specific, it's that something I would ask, especially when I have these consultations of when they want to do like Philippine dances, or incorporate Philippine music, I always ask them why? So, why do you have the need

to want to do this? I guess when I start asking those questions, like one particular year with SDSU [it threw out there], they had these lists of dances that they wanted to do and they threw the whole thing out, "you know, you're right, we have no reason to show any of this stuff." So, that's just something I wanted to add. It's really something I wanted to instill. I like the whole, I like creating and writing, like it's rebelling over everything. But yeah, along with that skeptic nature, just like why, why do you want to do this, what does this, what is the value of just simply showing something that you are not familiar with, or how does this affect your overall show, what exactly are you trying to present, is this focus, is this something that is authentic to even yourself? Just those kinds of questions, those are kind of the conversations I love instilling in these particular things. Whether or not they like it [or not], and sometimes they go in with this whole plan and, they go: "We have to go back to the drawing board." Not all the time, but it's kind of nice to get them to think about that.

Eleanor 00:22:05
That's really interesting. Michelle was kind of noticing a shift, you know, 80s and 90s, and then suddenly there was this shift to wanting to know the context. I'm hearing Nico you were saying there was this focus on story and plot. And, would you say, did you notice a shift to interest in cultural context or meaning?

Nico 00:22:42
No, honestly, I feel sometimes, yes. I think it depends on who you talk to, because in my personal experience, I definitely have heard some of the things that Michelle has brought up. But, when I'm making, most of the time when I've made consultation, or choreographed dance, or actually worked with a coordinator, most of the time they're still kind of in the dark. Still kind of perpetuating a lot of the modern stuff that kind of was reminiscent of 90s, 80s, I guess. The only difference is in context of the story itself. I feel like the story gets a lot more politic [sic], the plot gets a lot more political, a lot more current about. You know, openly talking about like racism, colorism, structural colonialism. It's a lot more. I think that is a shift in terms of plot, but in terms of actual cultural performing, not really. I don't think that has been so much of shift, not from what I've seen. I mean there are definitely pockets of: "ooh someone's really challenging something," but that's kind of few and far between, and maybe that's, to me, a little bit is still better than nothing that ever happens. So maybe that is the difference. So, to me, it doesn't seem that significant. Maybe there was literally nothing in the 90s, but in the 2010s, maybe having some people do that is a huge difference.

Michelle 00:24:11
What's coming up for me, when he's speaking about this, the fact that Nico and I have this responsibility in Samahan, because we are the teachers, we are the educators. Of not only the apprentices, which are like the older kids and the adults, but we also teach a big amount of junior dancers. We're talking from 4 years old to 14 years old. We are in this responsible title to teach these kids about their true traditional Philippine folk dances in its most traditional nature. Because we know that the more you tweak something you're just going to go farther and farther off track, and I guess that's what would happen, right? Where 80s 90s, it's like: "Oh, we're going

to be so creative and go." And all of a sudden, it's like: "Wait, you're far over there let's take it back." Get back on track again. And, I think that's where we are at right now.

Nico 00:25:18
I don't think [that's necessarily] going off track isn't a problem, but we go so far. If we are at this point, where we're off track, and we're kind of forgetting about where it comes from, or what it actually means, I think cultural context is really important. So, [I think that's why] I don't think doing something wacky is a problem, per se, cause there's obviously value in it. There's artistic merit to, creative license, all that stuff. But you don't also want to replace something that is "more authentic, something more traditional," you don't want to override history, is, I guess what I'm trying to say. And that's what I have learned over the years is that with all of this innovation and modernization, we're kind of overriding history, and that's kind of not problematic in its own ways as well. So, I see you're saying Michelle.

Eleanor 00:26:13
This is super interesting, talking about creativity and tradition, and that tightrope balance. In the interest of time, though, I need to kind of shift us over to the topic of research. We're going to ask each of you to kind of keep your statements to about five minutes, even though your research labs are very rich, who would like to go first?

Nico 00:26:42
I think Michelle has a really interesting story with UC Irvine, and how that started.

Michelle 00:26:44
In UC Irvine, there was this education-abroad program, which I applied for because I knew that KULARTS with Alleluia was taken about 12 Fil-am students to study the dance, music, costume, culture of the southern Philippines. So, I got a grant from UC Irvine to go with KULARTS. This was in 2004, and we went to so many different regions of Mindanao and studied with the tribes there, and just witnessed all types of rituals. And also, the music director of Samahan, very good friend, Dr. Bernard Ellorin was also part of that group. So, I was going there more towards like the dancing aspect and he was going there more towards the music aspect. And since 2004, Nico, myself, Bernard, and even Kim Kalanduyan, we went back to the Philippines last July. This is July 2019, to study some more out there. So, it's been incredible to go back there and meet up with our resources, just amazing, amazing people, to learn from them, and to bring back to the US, and to teach what we learned.

Nico 00:28:18
How I got into my approach with researching, kind of as I was saying earlier, I was kind of proactive about it, I was that person that I would like Google everything, every single dance that I learned about. And, I even remember, I had like Evernote, which is an online note taking app, and I would kind of just write down, I have this journal where I would write down everything that I knew about the dance. Whether it be right or wrong, just things that I had to associate with this, so everything. Tinikling-dance of a bird mimicry, something [like, you know], whatever it

is. I did that for every single thing until I realized that there's hundreds, maybe thousands of dances. Then, I kind of stopped that. And so, I started there, but—so this is me like eighteen/nineteen with Pasacat. And, I guess, while I was researching online, from what I was taught in a Pasacat. I would also contact people in BIBAK and in Samahan. Bernard was one of them and Jhoselle Padilla, you know who she is, she's also a formerly a member of PKE. And I would ask these questions and just like a lot of things would never add up, like sometimes they would. I originally thought: "Are these different variations?" And I kind of just pass it off as variations and then, that's where I realized that misappropriation, or "overriding culture" was a big thing that was happening. So that's what got really ingrained in history, so that's what I was about. I was all about research the books, the online, everything. When I got a hold of one of those Francesca Reyes Aquino books, like those anthology books. I got a hold of one, I was like, I got the gold mine. Nowadays I'm kind of like, I don't care about it because you know that was written a long time ago, where facts were not really checked as often. There's still great information in there, but, like I said, a lot of things were just not adding up. Like different generations were saying different things, different entities of different age ranges were saying different things. The internet, books everything was just never really adding up, until I really looked at the history and tried to read between the lines and see what they're actually saying. If they're saying this, it doesn't necessarily mean it has to be that. One specific example, I like pointing out is that when Bayanihan created their own version of Singkil—it's a really popular dance they created—they made it this princess fan dance, and they stand by them. [One of their quotes they say] "mommy" Urtula, which is their artistic director at the time was saying: "Yeah, we learned this from a princess, that's what makes it a princess dance," and it's based off the Maranao Darangen, which is their giant epic home-story. And so that's why they called it a princess dance, but you know, from what I've learned going to Mindanao, going back to that area is that it wasn't really performed by Princess, princesses don't really perform, if you're in the […] why would you really perform. You have to perform for the princess, why would a princess be performing, that doesn't make sense. And then, the more and more I went and researched, and talking to Bernard, a lot of the cultural practitioners, the actual natives of that area, is that I then realize that the word that they use for princess can be translated as a cultural performer in the context of that culture, which is the word *potri.* That's more of a title, the word *potri* can mean princess. You can say *potri* Michelle, and that can be translated as princess, but I guess a better translation would be your honor or your majesty, I guess. Your honor doesn't really suggest royalty, but it is a position of stature. And in the Maranao culture, the people who practice the arts, the *onors*, they would carry the title of *potri*, which can be confusing to some people. So, I'm starting to link some of those things together, where maybe the Bayanihan didn't actually learning from a "princess," but they did learn it with someone who carried that sort of title that was miss-translated at the time. So, it's just things like that, I'm just starting to piece together. I wouldn't have known that; had I not gone to the Philippines and really understand the culture. I'm not just talking about the dance itself; I'm talking about the culture, the language, how that has influence on the dance form, and how things get misconstrued.

Eleanor 00:3:03
You travel to Malaysia as well, right?

Nico 00:33:05
Yeah, I traveled to Malaysia as well. There's [sic] seafaring groups. There's a lot of ethnic groups in the Philippines that don't necessarily identify with a sovereignty per se, because their ethnic group and their culture is like trans migrating between many islands, or voyagers. So, many ethnic groups in the Sulu archipelago travel back and forth between the Philippines and Malaysia, and they don't really care whether, or not their "Filipino citizenship" or "Malaysian citizenship," they would probably call themselves by what they actually are, which is […] Bajao, Tausug, Sulu whatever they would identify as. [Not as] they would most likely say I'm a Sama person of Philippine citizenship, or I'm a Sama person of Malaysian citizenship, so there's a lot of crossing paths there as well.

Mary 00:33:54
What was your feeling when you kind of discovered, or realized that some of the books and resources that we rely on as performers of Philippine or Filipino folk dance? Well, [I feel, what] when you kind of realize these aren't so accurate, like you didn't quite put your finger on what the feeling was?

Nico 00:34:24
Honestly, I know what the feeling was, I was outraged. Because it was like, I felt like though, at least for me, i'm not saying this for anyone else, I'm not speaking on behalf of anyone else, but I remember, this was like in 2014, which is not even technically that long ago in grand scheme of things, I was like "everything I learned is a lie," or I remember making a big deal about it, I would complain about it to everyone that [I] was a part of PCN, so it was like "oh my god, did you know about this because blah blah blah blah blah blah blah," so I felt some type of way. So, I've since like to say that I've calmed down. But I also do understand why it happens, I used to be like, "oh, people are just evil, because they want to take things for themselves," but then I understand it's a system that pushed it to be like that. So, to answer your question I was, I felt some type of way.

Michelle 00:35:20
Nico, what was this curriculum like in the school in Batangas, they have this set curriculum where everybody does the dance the same way/ That's the bible of the folk dances.

Nico 00:35:35
[Yeah, a lot of the is not just in yeah] So, when me and Michelle went to the Philippines, one or the other, we also went to Batangas, and for people that don't know, people just loop colonial culture altogether. But the indigenous Tagalogs in this kind of way differ from the city, or urban Tagalog culture. So, we went to Batangas and we went about their rituals and whatnot. And, but to my understanding, a lot of the groups in the Philippines, not just groups, schools, colleges, they have a curriculum that is standardized, it's in the curriculum. I'm pretty sure it's part of their P.E., and there's a word for it that I since forgot, so I think it's actually been overturned like recently. But, for a long time, these dances were taught as a curriculum, as if you were to go to

P.E. and you'd learn how to play basketball. I'm just throwing out examples. It was part of their P.E. and extracurricular course that was mandatory in most cases. It's like when you go to a high school today and you go to a Home Ec. class, it was something you can take. I think it's a little bit more mandatory in the Philippines, I don't know how it is anymore, but many, many schools were like that, where you had to learn folk dances and whatnot. And, because it was standardized, because it was in higher education, [they had, how was it] how was it handled back then, you need a textbook, so what they base it off of were the manuscripts from Francesca Reyes Aquino and I believe Bayanihan's material as well, but mostly Francesca Reyes Aquino's manuscripts on Philippine dances and music. And that's not just dance, that's also *rondalla* as well. And because they also had a lot of "indigenous dances" in there, they had to really structure it in a way. So, for example if they had a dance like *Jota Batangueña*, they would literally tell you, like a snippet in their textbook, this is what the dance is about, this where it's from, and here are the steps. Literally written down choreography and formations on how to do things. For people that study vernacular dancing, that's not how "traditional dances" formed, like dance isn't formed through a textbook per se, it's kind of passed down non-literally. So, that's just how it is in the Philippines and in many ways, it's also help them to preserve a sight of those things that they wouldn't also have remembered decades and generations down the line. I've kind of alluded to the fact that can be problematic, but it has been helpful in the past to keep them "correct." And that is something very common in many schools in the Philippines.

Michelle 00:38:18
Keep them archived!

Mary 00:38:24
Now, going forward what do you think your recommendations would be to the current generation and the future generations of Filipino American cultural performers, college our community?

Michelle 00:38:39
Accessing resources, making it's of resources that are out there, reaching out, asking questions, make sure that what they're putting out there is respectful to the culture that they're representing, that's what I'd like to say about it.

Eleanor 00:39:05
How do you try to carry that out in your work as a dance teacher?

Michelle 00:39:10
Accessing the resources, and trying to represent the underrepresented groups, when someone has a gala, we look at our repertoire and see what can we put out there onto the stage that people probably haven't seen, or seen in a while, and yes, represent the underrepresented.

Nico 00:39:38

For forward strategies, the advice that I would give to all these cultural, people who want to work in culture, is ask yourself why, or ask yourself what you're trying to do. And why is it you want to these things. Is it because you want to learn about a part of yourself? Because you can learn about yourself in many different ways, because the rude awakening is the Philippines is very diverse. There is over 100, 200 ethnic different cultures, and you're probably not attached to every single one. Even Tinikling, per se, I'm not Leyteño, I'm not Visayan, that's one particular example. If the reason why you want to do certain things, it's because you want to learn, do you want to represent the underrepresented, like Michelle said, and you want to do it justice, you want to do your culture justice, then I feel that's a solid reasoning. If your reason for doing what you want to do is, do you want to be flashy and do something exotic, show people how cool you are, I think you really need to reevaluate some of your stances. Why do you actually want to do certain things? And if you do want to go ahead and go into the deeper, more seasoned cultural arts, there are resources, like Michelle and I've said, there is PKE, there is Ube Arte. YouTube it's in the greatest thing because how misleading a lot of things can be yes, but if you're going to use YouTube, because I know that a lot of people will, my general rule of thumb with YouTube is that if you are studying a dance, "authentic" cultural dance off of youTube, a general rule of thumb I would tell you is "is that YouTube video that you're watching, are they performing on a stage, are they performing at a theater, are they performing in the fields, they performing in it at a party?" And that is what's gonna point you in better directions of using YouTube videos that aren't problematic. Because that's generally what I've seen on YouTube, that aren't on stage, that aren't at a theater, the ones that are in the fields, that really actually resembles what I have seen, what Michelle has seen, in the actual field in the Philippines. So, I kind of use that to filter out, if you're going to use YouTube, I don't highly recommend it, if you are, I understand how accessible it is, I would just use that checklist. Is this done in the theater, if it is, then it's probably not the most authentic piece. It's probably heavily innovated, heavily modernized.

Michelle 00:42:35
Yes, and as a beautiful and graceful way to educate and to entertain respectfully. There is a graceful way that you can put those two together.

Eleanor 00:42:46
How would you advise a dancer or a choreographer if it feels like they want to be creative be creative and express themselves using some of the gestures or trappings of Philippine culture, what kind of advice would you give them?

Nico 00:43:07
I think that what they have to realize is that many of these gestures, the reason that you find them entertaining it's because it's "exotic" to you. And, if it's exotic to you that means it's not real. By definition, it's not of your culture. Pangalay, Singkil, is [sic] very popular right now, and I'm not Tausug, Sama, Maranao, Maguindanao, I'm not any ethnic [r…]. I'm not of ancestry of an ethnic group. I don't have any sort of ties with that stuff. So, you have to understand, if you are to modernize it, you're taking it out of context. And, the advice I would give is, feel free to do so, but the research that you do, I would ask yourselves time and time again, do you feel

comfortable showing what you create to someone who is actually of that culture. If you wanted to do Singkil for example, you wanted to make something super creative about it, make it innovative in your own way, how comfortable would you feel about your piece, showing that to a master performer of that actual culture. Like an *Onor*, who is a master at performing Singkil, how comfortable would you be showing that to them?

Michelle 00:44:31
And that would be the gauge

Nico 00:44:31
Yeah, just keep that conversation going on in your head, and I feel that you'll find the way.

Mary 00:44:43
I think Filipino American organizations often say in their mission statements that they want to promote, preserve, and educate Filipino youth about Philippine culture. How do you think your experience, you almost grew up in this organization, Michelle, Nico you went into it very early on. First, how do you think it helped shape you, personally, to be so engaged with Filipino culture as a Filipino American? Number two, what are the things that we as Philippine American cultural educators, what do you think are the valuable things to pass down to the youth?

Michelle 00:45:36
The incredible diversity of the Philippines, right? How it's not just a broad stroke cultural affair, cultural experience, hundreds of different cultures. In regard to the organization that we are part of, a big thing that is necessary is communication and dialogue. With Nico being the generation that he is, myself coming from where I've grown up with the elders in Samahan, there needs to be this constant open dialogue, because, generationally speaking, there can be some clashing of ideas. And, in order for the, like Nico and his ideas and his thoughts in regards [sic] to how we teach the younger kids, compared to the elders, how they feel like we need to teach the kids, it's all trying to get on the same page. So, there is a necessary communication that needs to happen within each organization, so that we are all on the same page [to] in what we need to teach the younger kids right now.

Mary 00:47:00
How do you think that education, that cultural education, helps them as Filipino Americans?

Michelle 00:47:15
Definitely, in them learning the dances, it [gives them] instills confidence in them. It creates a sense of community. With us right now, we've been teaching them how to sing, also different songs in Ilocano, Caviteño. Nico's been coming with teaching them how to speak the different languages. So, it's enriching them in that way, and let me tell you they have amazing memories, where they learn the songs faster than I can even learn the songs. So, it's just amazing how fast these kids learn, because they're just so open to it, they're just like an open book. So, going back to the responsibility that we have as teachers, what I love teaching them is the diversity of the

many different cultures in regards to the Maguindanao pieces, rural country side pieces, the […] Tagalog pieces, so, they might not know right now about the incredible diversity of the Philippines, they're just taking it as we teach them, but hopefully they'll realize later that each different region is so distinct in itself, form the Cordilleras to Southern Philippine, to the Ilocano dances. Recalling from what I learned, from when I was 8 years old to college years, I was just learning, and now it is like oh my gosh the Spanish-influenced dances, everything is so highlighted now, and distinct to the history of the Philippines in regards to colonization, in regards to a location in each island. Anything come up for you, Nico?

Nico 00:49:08
Yeah, I know we talk about cultural context and the research in native practice, I think that's all very important, but I also think it's important to educate in our terminology. Using certain phrases that can't be misleading, I feel like the term Philippine dance is such a vague statement, what does that mean? I know we've grown up learning that the Philippines is this one country that my parents are from. It's the Philippines, you're Filipino, I'm Filipino, or we are Filipino, that's that. So, it makes us have complete ownership of everything that makes up those 7,110 islands, but it's completely diverse. It's just as vague as saying American dance - what does that mean? That can mean square dancing, or hip-hop, completely different things, completely different areas, completely different ethnic groups, time periods, all that stuff. And to say that, I think just education and terminology in just saying this is a Philippine dance, I don't want to say it's problematic, but it can be misleading. That's a Philippine dance and that's a Philippine dance, I mean it's all the same thing. So, I think education even in terminology, which is why I try to stay away from those kinds of things, I don't like really saying Philippine dance a whole lot. I'll mainly define a piece as "this is a Sama dance." "This a dance that is by the Tausug people, these are Tausug dances, a Maranao dance, this is a song in *Sinama.* That gives it its own identity in itself, as opposed to being "they're all just Philippine dances." The over inclusion is degrading to what it is, and it's given itself less character in a way. So, I think education and the way we talk about it is important. Even if we don't really know, if we keep say in the words, like Maria Clara, Maguindanao, eventually something is going to stick, and we're going to remember that's a different movement from that. Even if we are just part of a PCN one year, I think, it's been better because at least they can tell the difference between a mountain dance and a "Muslim" dance from Mindanao. That's education in terminology and that has been helpful. And, if we can just fine-tune that further, and as opposed to just saying mountain, "oh, it's a Kalinga dance, it's an Ifugao dance." Instead of saying Muslim or Moro, we can say that's a Maranao dance. It's just overgeneralizing.

Michelle 00:51:54
I feel like that is what we are really focusing on right now with the kids. That is what I really appreciate about the education system with Samahan right now. It's that foundational knowledge and insight about the dance, where it's from, the cultural context, and then leading, segueing into the choreography and the movement, allowing these kids, ranging from 4 to 14, to be able to decipher, distinguish these pieces. Even the difference between a Maguindanao malong and

Maranao malong. Can you tell the difference? Because, let me tell you, it wasn't until I was in my 30s that I was able to distinguish between the two.

Nico 00:52:58
Even just differentiating the two. Saying that something is Filipino is too vague, it strips it of its character. […] I've learned so much about certain cultures just because it has the title Maranao attached to it. Now I've learned so much more, specifically, about Maranao people, as opposed to general Philippines.

Eleanor 00:53:29
I have a devil's advocate question. We talk about Filipino American history and it's an established field, a topic, a major. Would you say that we can claim there's such a thing as Filipino American dance?

Michelle 00:53:48
What would that be?

Nico 00:53:52
I'm going to say yes, but I don't think that is an entirely new thing. I think it is correct to say there is an established Philippine dance, art form a Philippine performing arts platform, I think it's correct to say that. But, in my personal opinion and from my what I've researched, even throughout general world history, colonialism is strong and the fact that it is Filipino American really heavily implies that it is colonized. It is not in its actual roots. The Philippines has its own problems of being colonized by Americans and other European and Asian cultures, but I think by calling it Filipino American dance, or Filipino performing arts is correct, but I think it also heavily implies that it is Filipino American dance, so it's showcasing a lot of this colonial mentality with how the American culture is dominating over "traditional" Philippine culture. And, it's showing that. And, yeah, it's its own platform, it's a thing. Look at any PCN, even a Philippine dance company, we're not perfect here on Samahan, it happens. But, it is an art that is its own thing, I would say it's correct. Would I say it's the most beautiful thing in the world? Sometimes, I think it's wishy-washy. By saying Philippine American, like I said, it implies a lot of colonialism, and we are not seeing that as Filipino Americans, we don't see it as oppressive because it's us, but hold on, it's Filipino Americans. How does what we do affect the minority? And, who is the minority or who is the marginalized culture? Definitely not the Americans. So, that's what I hear when you tell me about Philippine American dance. To a degree, I would even consider Bayanihan, and implementing that into schools, Philippine American dance. It's Philippine dance that was put into an American education system. It's how I interpret it, when I hear Philippine American dance, I hear colonialism, that's what I hear.

Eleanor 00:56:57
Any thoughts Michelle?

Michelle 00:57:00

I can't follow up on that, I've learned from that.

Eleanor 00:57:10
I'm just saying that we have to tread carefully, it's a sensitive area. There's a lot of danger for power dynamics, and we should just be careful.

Michelle 00:57:23
I myself, I am Filipino American. In representing the Philippine dancers, but I myself being Filipino American, I only identify as my identity presenting the cultural arts.

Nico 00:57:41
I like to think that I am a Filipino American representing Kalinga culture, Tausug culture, Maranao culture, and a couple of Filipino-American pieces alongside that.

Eleanor 00:57:56
I think it's about time to wrap up. Does anyone want to add anything in closing, before we say goodbye?

Michelle 00:58:00
We appreciate you for creating this platform for all of us to share our experiences to help people pursue for the greater good, and to be skeptical, to ask questions, to know that there are resources out there.

Nico 00:58:30
Thank you so much for this. This is something I really would've appreciated back in the time when I was scourging [sic] the internet, looking for everything about Philippine dance.

Michelle 00:58:43
Working with Nico for the past four years, I want to say that I adore his passion. Since I first met him, at first, I was "wow, you got a lot," but four years later, I support you. I am twice his age and I really feel positively about our future because we have Nico with his insight. And, I'm right there, I'm your number one fan rooting for you.

Nico 00:59:18
Thank you. Honestly, you inspire me as well. This whole thing, this Philippine cultural performing arts, inspires me. It's my first love in life. If I can make this into a career, into a lifelong passion, that's fine. I love it so much, this life, I genuinely love Philippine cultural arts and it's performing arts. Whether in the context of PCNs, or traditionally in the field by indigenous people. I think it's a really large picture to be a part of, I'm glad I'm part of something so big and so great.

Mary 01:00:10

Thank you so much for contributing to this and giving us your insight, and your knowledge, and your incredible experience is doing this so, thank you.

END OF TRANSCRIPTION

KEYWORDS

PEOPLE
Alleluia Panis (Tribal Tour/ KULARTS)
Bernard Ellorin
Ligaya Amilbangsa
Lolita Carter (Samahan)
Ruby Pearl Chiong
Francisca Reyes Aquino
Princess/Potri/ Onor/Bai (royal/ honorific category)
Kim Kalanduyan
Jhoselle Padilla
Dr. Lucrecia Reyes-Urtula (mommy Urtula)

ETHNOLINGUISTIC GROUPS
Maguindanao
Maranao
Sama
Tausug
Ilocano
Caviteño
Sinama

GROUPS
Samahan (San Diego)
PKE (Pakaraguian Kulintang Ensemble)
Pasacat
Kababayan - UCI
Filams (Filipino Americans)
Bibak (Benguet, Ifugao, Bontoc, Apayao, and Kalinga)/Bibak
Los Angeles Kulingtang Arts, a.k.a. KULARTS

PLACES
Mindanao
Cordillera Mountains
Batangas
Sulu Archipelago
Ifugao
Kalinga
UCSD
UC Irvine

DANCE
Pangalay
Tinikling
Singkil

MUSIC
Kulintang
Rondalla

OTHER
PCN - Pilipino Cultural Night
Darangen (Maranao epic tales)
Putri (princess)

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